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ABSTRACT

A study compared the comprehension abilities of readers when reading narrative and expository discourse. It was designed to investigate how middle-level high-achieving and low-achieving readers comprehend the two discourse genres, testing the readers' comprehension of main ideas in the text under both conditions. Also examined was whether comprehension differences existed between Hispanic and Anglo readers. Subjects were 48 seventh and eighth grade readers from an urban school district in the southwestern part of the United States. Subjects were randomly selected and placed into one of two reader groups according to reading achievement. Results indicated that readers performed equally well in their ability to extract detailed information under both text conditions; comprehension differences between narrative and expository discourse increased with the level of importance of text macrostructures. Results indicated readers recalled twice as much of the main idea information from narrative text than they did in the expository text. Hispanic and Anglo readers performed equally well in recalling the important elements of the texts, but their emphasis differed with regard to lower level statements. Hispanic readers' recall of the most important text information was significantly higher than their recall of the other macrostructure levels--these differences were not evidenced in Anglo readers. Results of this study indicate that in the middle grades, readers continue to be less sensitive to the main ideas contains in expository materials. (CR)

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Examining Responses to Text: Are We Giving Our Readers a Fair Shake?

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Purpose and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this investigation was to compare the comprehension abilities of readers when reading narrative and expository discourse. The study was designed to investigate how middle-level high-achieving and low-achieving readers comprehend the two discourse genres. More specifically, the readers' comprehension of main ideas in the text under both conditions was tested. The two research questions targeted in this proposal include: *How do readers comprehend the important information under both narrative and expository text conditions?* and *Are comprehension differences present between Hispanic and Anglo readers?*

This study is unique in several important ways. First, text comparison studies are less common, perhaps because of the inherent elements underlying the task of balancing the comprehension load of the two text types. Not only were the passages in this study matched by readability levels, but micro- and macropropositional analyses were done to account for the semantic complexity of the texts. In addition to semantic complexity, the two passages were controlled for topic and reader interest. This study also used passages of longer length than has been typically employed in comprehension studies, and has examined an age group that has been relatively neglected in the literature.

Method

The subjects for this study were forty eight 7th and 8th grade readers. They were sampled from an urban school district in the southwestern part of the United States. Subjects were randomly selected and placed into one of two reader groups according to reading achievement scores: high- and low-achieving readers. Groups were balanced for ethnicity (Hispanic and Anglo) and gender. All subjects were native speakers of English, possessed a minimum fourth grade reading level, and scored within the normal range on receptive vocabulary abilities. In addition, the subjects were without any history of special education, ESL, or speech/language intervention.

Each subject, after responding to a background knowledge survey, individually read a narrative and an expository passage about the Arctic. Immediate recalls of each passage were analyzed to assess readers' comprehension of the important content in the discourse. Recall protocols were scored by assigning subjects' statements to the passage macrostructures. The macrostructure of each discourse was organized into four hierarchical levels according to the importantness in the text using Kintsch's work on macropropositions. Level 1 statements represented the most important, or main ideas in the passage, while Level 4 statements included text detail. Retellings were individually analyzed and coded to examine subjects' organization and comprehension of important content contained in each passage. Protocols were scored by assigning each text-based statement to one of the four levels of the passage macrostructures.

Results

The results of this study are restated with reference to each research question proposed above.

How do the readers comprehend the important information under both the narrative and

expository text conditions? The analysis revealed a highly significant interaction between the levels of the text macrostructures and the type of discourse ($p < .001$). A significantly higher percentage of statements in the narrative passage was recalled for Levels 1, 2, and 3 statements. High- and low-achieving readers recalled significantly more statements from the narrative passage than the expository passage for the three highest levels of the text macrostructures. For the most important elements of the texts (Levels 1 and 2), readers recalled nearly twice as many macropropositions in the narrative than in the expository passage. Yet interestingly, the readers recalled detail information (Level 4) from the expository passage equally as well as they did in the narrative passage. There was no difference between the passage types on the readers' ability to recall the detail statements.

Are comprehension differences present between Hispanic and Anglo readers? This study revealed a significant interaction between ethnic groups and the comprehension of the text macrostructures ($p < .01$). Hispanic and Anglo readers performed equally on their abilities to recall the important elements of the texts but their emphasis differed with regard to lower level statements. Hispanic readers' recall of the most important text information (Level 1) was significantly higher than their recall of the other three macrostructure levels. These differences were not evidenced in the Anglo readers. Hispanic readers appeared to include fewer lower-level statements (details) to support the important information in their retellings.

Scientific Importance and Educational Implications of Study

This study was designed to investigate how middle-level readers understand two discourse genres, namely, narrative and expository. The readers' comprehension of main ideas under both text conditions was tested. Analysis of the text macrostructures enabled not only a closer examination of the semantic make-up and comprehension load of the texts, but a means by which the readers' recalls could be measured in a more exacting manner.

The findings of this investigation support previous studies with elementary school-aged children that readers recall fewer text-based statements in expository than in narrative discourse. However, the results of this study further suggest that, even in the middle school grades, high-achieving and low-achieving readers continue to exhibit more difficulty comprehending expository discourse in comparison to narrative discourse.

More importantly, this study examined the kind of comprehension differences that were present between the two text conditions. Although readers performed equally as well in their ability to extract detail information under both text conditions, comprehension differences between narrative and expository discourse increased with the level of importance of text macrostructures. Readers recalled twice as much of the main idea information from narrative text than they did in the expository text. A qualitative difference in the way that narrative and expository discourse is recalled in Hispanic and Anglo readers was also noted. Hispanic readers did not recall detail information in the same way that Anglo readers did.

The results of this study pose some important challenges for educators of elementary and middle school-aged readers. By the time children reach the middle grades, they are required to use textbook materials regularly. The task of reading becomes the principal means by which new knowledge is acquired in school. Yet the results of this study indicate that in the middle grades, readers continue to be less sensitive to the main ideas contained in expository materials.

This presents a call for further research to clarify these findings and to understand the reading process more fully. This investigation only examined one type of expository discourse structure, namely, descriptive. Are the differences between the two genres present when comparing other types of expository discourse (e.g., sequence structures, comparison/contrast structures, cause/effect structures, and problem/solution structures)? What are the factors influencing narrative and expository differences that have not yet been considered? For example, what are the roles of evaluative strategies, temporal elements, characterization, and coherence factors on the comprehension process of the two discourse types? What are the pedagogical and assessment procedures used by educators to facilitate readers' comprehension of expository materials? Is the comprehension of supporting and detail information emphasized over knowledge of main ideas?

The procedures used in this study for balancing the comprehension load of narrative and expository discourse might serve as a starting point for future comparative studies as a method to more accurately match text comprehension levels. The potential for the application of macrostructural analysis to reading research is promising. It should be explored as a tool that may be useful in the development of textbooks, evaluation and screening tests, and other classroom reading, teaching, and assessment materials.

Examining Responses to Text

Are We Giving Our Readers a Fair Shake?

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Study

- compared comprehension of narrative and expository text
- comprehension load
  - readability
  - micropropositions
  - macropropositions
  - topic
  - interest
- unique features
  - passage length
  - age group

Macrostructure Procedure

800 words	Original text
400-word summary	Level 4 -detail
200-word summary	Level 3 -interest
100-word summary	Level 2 -support
50-word summary	Level 1 -salient

Findings

- discourse type
  - sensitivity of levels analysis
  - level 1
  - level 4
- hispanic readers
  - sensitivity of levels analysis
  - supporting main ideas